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The *Cave of Treasures* and the Formation of Syriac Christian Identity in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Between Tradition and Innovation

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It was in the last decades of the past century that the notions of collective and ethnic identity, developed primarily in the fields of sociology and social anthropology, transcended the domain of social sciences and became important heuristic tools in the hands of historians.[1] Suitability of these categories for understanding ancient societies has been demonstrated by the works of a number of scholars of Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity.[2] It should be noted, however, that while there is a growing number of studies on development of Christian identity during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, this research is confined primarily to the boundaries of Greek and Latin-speaking parts of the Christian *œcumene*. One can only deplore the lack of systematic scholarly attention when it comes to the issues of identity-formation in the Syriac-speaking and other non-Western Christian cultures. There are

[1] For more information on this area of research, see Alcoff, 'Introduction'; Miles, 'Introduction'.

[2] See, for example, Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*; Stenger, *Hellenische Identität in der Spätantike*; Goodblatt, *Elements of Ancient Jewish Nationalism*; Lieu, *Christian Identity*; Buell, *Why This New Race*; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*.

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important exceptions, such as, for example, the commendable work done by the Leiden research group on the formation of West-Syrian communal identity.[3] Nevertheless, even this project does not present us with a complete picture of how Syriac Christian identity developed through the centuries, as it deals with only one segment of the Syriac-speaking world, i.e. the West-Syrian, and is limited in its time-span, focussing mainly on the Islamic period. In view of that, the task of providing a comprehensive and systematic account of the formation of Syriac-speaking Christian identity, beginning with the period of Late Antiquity, remains to be accomplished.

This paper aims to contribute to this field of research by exploring several aspects of the formation of Syriac Christian identity reflected in the work known as the *Cave of Treasures*. This composition was written in Syriac in the Sasanian-controlled part of northern Mesopotamia somewhere between the middle of the sixth century and beginning of the seventh. It belongs to the loosely defined category of 'rewritten Bible' and offers a particular version of Christian *Heilsgeschichte* in which the accounts of both the Old and the New Testaments are creatively merged into a new cohesive narrative that starts with the creation of the world and ends with the Pentecost. This new version of the sacred history features a number of remarkable innovations that are not found in the canonical narratives and that serve the peculiar agenda of the *Cave of Treasures*'s author. It is not an easy task to situate this text within the variegated world of the Syriac-speaking Christianity of Late Antiquity. However, some internal and external considerations, such as the affinity of the exegetical traditions used by the author and the history of the work's reception, allow us to propose that its author belonged to a West-Syrian, i.e. miaphysite milieu.[4]

There are several major lines along which the author of the *Cave of Treasures* reworks the biblical narrative. One of them is the strong anti-Jewish bias

[3] For a description of this project and its results, see Romeny, 'From Religious Association to Ethnic Community'; Romeny and others, 'The Formation of a Communal Identity', and other publications in this issue. Among other important contributions on development of Syriac Christian identity, we may note several articles that appear in the collective volume: van Ginkel, Murre-van den Berg, and van Lint, eds, *Redefining Christian Identity*, as well as Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*.

[4] For a critical edition of the text alongside the French translation, see *La Caverne des trésors*, ed. by Su-Min Ri. For general information, see Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors*; Leonhard, 'Observations on the Date of the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*'. In Chapter 1 of my forthcoming doctoral dissertation, an in-depth examination of the issues related to the *Cave of Treasures*'s dating and milieu is offered.

that characterizes the composition as a whole. In fact, at one point (*Cave of Treasures*, XLIV. 1–4) the author declares that the entire work was undertaken by him as an apology aimed at providing the correct genealogy of Mary, which would dispose of the Jewish attacks on Jesus's descent. Another important aspect of the *Cave of Treasures*'s reshaping of biblical material is the author's close engagement with Iranian culture, pursued on different levels — both as polemic against Zoroastrianism and as creative appropriation of Iranian ideas and images.

The third major aspect of the literary endeavour of the *Cave of Treasures*'s author with which this article deals is that through a reworking of the canonical version of the biblical past he aims to forge and promote a unique version of Christian identity, one tailored specifically to his Syriac-speaking community. The period within which the composition of the *Cave of Treasures* falls, i.e. from the second half of the fifth century to the beginning of the seventh, was an axial age in the history of Syriac Christianity, crucial for the development of the main variations of Syriac Christian identity.[5] The author of our text has contributed to this process by promoting his own peculiar vision of Syriac Christian identity, deeply rooted in the biblical past, where cultural and religious elements are merged. In what follows I offer an examination of the two central elements of this strategy — appeal to the authority of Ephrem the Syrian and affirmation of the priority of the Syriac language. To establish the degree to which our author was traditional or innovative in his use of these elements, they will be analysed in their diachronic context.

1. Attribution to Ephrem

In many Syriac manuscripts of the *Cave of Treasures* authorship is ascribed to Ephrem, the famous fourth-century Syriac Church Father. Although Ephrem undoubtedly could not be the author — this attribution is an apparent anachronism — it still deserves our serious attention as an essential element in the author's strategy of promoting his version of Syriac identity. This pseudepigraphic attribution should be analysed in the context of the growing importance of Ephrem's figure among Syriac-speaking Christians during the sixth and seventh centuries.

[5] On various aspects of this process, see Brock, 'Christians in the Sassanian Empire'; Millar, 'Community, Religion and Language'; Debié, 'Syriac Historiography and Identity Formation'; Reinink, 'Tradition and the Formation of the "Nestorian" Identity'.

Before discussing this aspect of the *Cave of Treasures*, the issue should be addressed whether or not the attribution to Ephrem belongs to the oldest stratum of the work, since there are scholars who consider it to be a late addition to the originally anonymous text. Such a position is taken, for example, by Su-Min Ri, who dismisses the attribution to Ephrem, without bringing any arguments, regarding it as an outcome of the later efforts to obtain legitimacy for the composition by its transmitters.[6] Contrary to Ri, I believe that this attribution should be regarded as an original and integral element of the *Cave of Treasures*'s text, a suggestion I have based on several indications, internal as well as external.

First of all, to the original character of the Ephremian attribution testifies its appearance in the majority of the work's Syriac manuscripts, including its most important textual witness — Or^{A}.[7] This evidence is further strengthened by some internal literary features that support the view of the *Cave of Treasures* being devised by its author not as an anonymous work, but as a pseudepigraphic one. One such feature is the appearance throughout the work of several sentences in which the narrator becomes visible in the text by speaking in the first person, when he addresses an interlocutor named 'Namusaya' or makes aside comments.[8] It would be against the logic of narrative for a supposedly anonymous work to feature such first-person utterances. Among these passages, a special position is occupied by *Cave of Treasures*, XLIV. 16, where the narrator refers to divine grace as the source of his authority. This claim resonates well with the image of Ephrem as a divinely inspired teacher, an image that had gained great popularity among Syriac Christians by the time of the *Cave of Treasures*'s composition.[9]

As for external evidence, Ephremian attribution is corroborated by several ancient translations of the *Cave of Treasures* and by references to this work found in some later Syriac compositions. Concerning the former, in

[6] Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors*, p. 100.

[7] The Ephremian attribution is attested in all manuscripts of the Western recension and in eighty per cent of the complete manuscripts of the Eastern recension ($Or^{ADELOPSU}$ v. Or^{MV}). Ephrem is mentioned as the work's author also in MS 196 of the Patriarchal Library of the Church of the East in Baghdad, on fol. 111^{r} (on this MS, see Ṣlīwā, *Fihrist maḫṭūṭāt maktabat*, p. 194). In many East-Syrian manuscripts the attribution to Ephrem is given not in the title but in the concluding sentence, i.e. *Cave of Treasures*, LIV.16.

[8] Cf. *La Caverne des trésors*, ed. by Su-Min Ri XV. 6 (Or^{A}); XLIII. 14; XLIV. 16–19, 50–51; XLV. 1; XLVII. 6; XLVIII. 5 (Or.); L. 3; LII. 14; LIII. 11.

[9] On this, see below.

the still unpublished Karshuni recension of the *Cave of Treasures* (Mingana Syr. nº 32, fols 89ᵛ–145ᵛ) Ephrem is mentioned as the author of the work.[10] He is also named as the author of the work in the title of the Georgian version.[11] As to the ancient Syriac writers quoting the *Cave of Treasures* under the name of Ephrem, one of the earliest examples of this kind comes from the *Gannat Bussame*, an East-Syrian commentary on biblical pericopes composed around the tenth century. There we come across a piece of Mary's genealogy according to which Eleazar had two sons — Matthan and Jotham, the former being Joseph's grandfather (cf. Matthew 1. 15) and the latter Mary's, which is said to be declared by 'Mar Ephrem in the succession of generations' (ܒܣܕܪ ܕܪܗܝܡ ܡܪ ,ܐܦ).[12] This tradition, while absent from surviving manuscripts of the *Cave of Treasures*, is found in the Arabic translation of the work.[13] Similarly, the author of the anonymous West-Syrian *Chronicle to the Year 1234* cites under Ephrem's name a piece of biblical genealogy related to Zerubabel which is identical to that of *Cave of Treasures*, XLIII. 15.[14] Here apparently belongs also the case of Abdisho of Nisibis, a thirteenth-century East-Syrian writer. In his argument with those who hold the Syriac language to be inferior to Arabic, Abdisho claims that Syriac was the primeval language, and he cites as a proof-text the passage from Ephrem where Syriac is said to be the first language up to the division of tongues at the time of Peleg.[15] While no such claim is found in the authentic surviving works of Ephrem, we do find a very closely related statement in *Cave of Treasures*, XXIV. 9–11, the passage analysed in detail below. Attribution to Ephrem is found also in the *Questions of Simon Peter*, a medieval pseudepigraphic work written in Syriac, whose author apparently knew and used the *Cave of Treasures*.[16]

[10] See Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors*, p. 58.

[11] See *La Caverne des trésors*, trans. by Mahé, I (1992), p. 1.

[12] *Gannat Bussame*, ed. by Reinink, p. 53 (trans. p. 63).

[13] *Die Schatzhöhle*, ed. and trans. by Bezold, II: *Texte* (1888), p. 229.

[14] ܡܕܒܪܟ ܠܗ ܥܡ ܚܕܝܕ ܘܐܦ ܗܠܦ ܒܝ ,ܐܦ ܚܕ ܡܢ ܡܪܝ ܗܘ ܕܐܡܪ ܒܫܡ ܡܪ ܐܦܪܗܡ ܕܐܦ ܡܢ ܕܒܪ ܫܦ ܡܢ ܕܒܪ ܒܗ ܐܦ ܡܢ ܕܒܪ ܒܗ; *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, ed. by Chabot, I, ed. by Jean Baptiste Chabot and Aphram Barsaum (1920), p. 103.

[15] ܐܢ ܡܕܒܪܟ ܕܐܦ ܡܪ ܐܦܪܗܡ ܕܐܦ ܡܢ ܐܢ ܡܕܒܪܟ ܠܫܢ ܣܘܪܝܝܐ ܠܫܢ ܣܘܪܝܝܐ ܕܗܘ ܠܫܢ ܩܕܡܝܐ ܕܐܬܦܠܓ ܒܫܡ ܕܦܠܓ ܕܐܬ ܕܐܬ ܒܗ ,ܗܘ ܕܐܬ ܠܫܢ ܩܕܡܝܐ

That the *Cave of Treasures* was originally devised as Ephremian pseudepigraphon is important for understanding the particular agenda pursued by the work's author. To understand what cultural work such attribution might perform in the context of sixth-century Syriac Christianity, let us take a brief look at the role that the figure of Ephrem played at that time.

The process of Ephrem's canonization began soon after his death around the year 373 and by the sixth century it had reached its zenith. His life and achievements were celebrated and made widely known in the Syriac *vita* that was already in circulation by that time.[17] Ephrem was the first native Syriac writer to be highly revered, and not only by his compatriots; his fame spread all through the Christian world.[18] Turning Ephrem into an international celebrity had catalyzed the process of pseudepigraphic creativity under his name.[19]

By the late fifth century and beginning of the sixth Ephrem's authority was already firmly established among the West Syrians. Thus Jacob of Serug dedicated a special *memra* to him, in which he extolled Ephrem as 'an amazing orator who surpassed the Greeks in his manner of speech', and as 'the crown of the entire Syrian nation' (ܟܠܝܠܐ ܕܟܠ ܐܘܡܬܐ ܣܘܪܝܝܬܐ).[20] Philoxenus of Mabbugh quotes Ephrem extensively in his early theological works.[21] For Philoxenus, who characterizes Ephrem as 'the teacher of us Syrians' (ܡܠܦܢܢ ܕܣܘܪܝܝܐ), he is the only Syriac Church Father who meets the standards represented by such Greek-speaking touchstones of orthodoxy as Athanasius, the Cappadocians and Cyril of Alexandria.[22] Likewise, in the miaphysite *Confession of Faith*, ascribed to Jacob Baradaeus, preserved only in Geez, Ephrem is listed among the most authoritative Syrian Fathers.[23]

[17] For the text and discussion, see, *The Syriac Vita Tradition*, ed. and trans. by Amar.

[18] See Griffith, 'Images of Epraem', pp. 7–17; Taylor, 'St Ephraim's Influence on the Greeks', chs 1–17.

[19] The corpus of writings attributed to Ephrem is truly impressive both in size and in geographical distribution. The Ephremian dossier was transmitted in practically all the literary languages of ancient Christianity — Greek, Latin, Armenian, Georgian, Christian Arabic, Geez, Coptic, Church Slavonic. For an overview of this diverse material, see Hemmerdinger-Iliadou and Kirchmeyer, 'Éphrem'; Blanchard, 'The Coptic Heritage of St Ephrem'; Outtier, 'Les Recueils arméniens et géorgiens d'œuvres'; Samir, 'L'Éphrem arabe'; Vaillant, 'Le saint Éphrem'.

[20] Jacob of Serug, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem*, ed. by Amar, pp. 32–33, 64–65.

[21] For an insightful analysis of Philoxenus's attitude to Ephrem, see Van Rompay, 'Mallpânâ dilan Suryâyâ', chs 1–34.

[22] de Halleux, 'Nouveaux textes inédits de Philoxène de Mabbog', p. 38 (trans. p. 44).

[23] Schodde, 'A Monophysite Confession', p. 57.

When it comes to the East-Syrian tradition, it might seem that, during the sixth century, the figure of Ephrem was overshadowed to a certain extent by that of Theodore of Mopsuestia, especially in what concerns biblical exegesis. Whether this is true or not, there are still enough references that show Ephrem to be a highly respected figure among the East Syrians as well. For example, Barhadbeshabba in his *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools* makes mention of Ephrem's contribution to the development of the educational system.[24] We hear also about the liturgy ascribed to Ephrem being celebrated in the city of Nisibis until the first half of the seventh century, when the catholicos Ishoyahb III abolished this custom as part of his programme of standardization of the East-Syrian rite.[25] Furthermore, in the seventh century Martyrius-Sahdona refers to Ephrem as 'the great teacher [...], who in the Church of God is relied upon as a prophet' (ܡܫܡܫܢܐ ܪܒܐ ܕܒܥܕܬܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܡܗܝܡܢ ܗܘ. ܐܦ ܒܢܒܝܐ ܐܚܕ ܡܬܚܫܒ ܗܘ ܒܥܕܬܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ).[26]

This praise of Ephrem as a prophet by Martyrius belongs to the popular tradition, reflected in a number of Syriac works representing Ephrem as a divinely inspired teacher. In the fictitious correspondence of Papa of Seleucia, Ephrem is several times referred to as a prophet.[27] Similar statements appear in the Syriac *Life of Ephrem* (ch. 14) and in the Syriac version of Palladius's *Lausiac History* (ch. 40), where Ephrem's prolific teachings are described as 'a fountain flowing from his mouth', and it is said of him that 'what issued from his lips was from the Holy Spirit'.[28]

It is this traditional image of Ephrem as quasi-prophetic teacher that stands behind the explicit claim for authority made by the narrator of the *Cave of Treasures*, which is based less on scholastic values such as book learning or adherence to the tradition than on immediate inspiration by God. This claim is expressed most clearly in *Cave of Treasures*, XLIV. 16, where the narrator refers to 'the grace of Christ' (ܨܒܝܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ) as the source of his confidence as a writer and of his superiority over the rest of ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiasti-

[24] Barhadbeshabba, *Cause de la fondation des écoles*, ed. by Scher, pp. 381–82.

[25] See *Histoire nestorienne*, ed. and trans. by Scher and Périer, I: *Première partie (i)* (1907), p. 295.

[26] Martyrius-Sahdona, *Œuvres spirituelles*, ed. and trans. by de Halleux, *Book of Perfection* II. 7. 25, vol. II (1961), p. 82.

[27] See Braun, 'Der Briefwechsel des Katholikos Papa von Seleucia', pp. 167, 176, 178.

[28] For the former, see *The Syriac Vita Tradition*, ed. and trans. by Amar, pp. 28–29 (trans. pp. 32–33); for the latter, see Palladius, *Les Formes syriaques*, ed. and trans. by Draguet, II, pp. 286–89 (trans. vol. IV, pp. 190–92).

cal writers in being able to present the true succession of the generations from Adam to Jesus.[29] It is possible to regard these words as an expression of the topos of God's assistance that was widespread among the Christian writers of Late Antiquity. However, there is a difference between the author of the *Cave of Treasures* and many other Syriac authors who resort to this literary convention.[30] In distinction from these writers, God's assistance in *Cave of Treasures*, XLIV. 16 is not marked in terms of modality as something the narrator desires to obtain, but is presented in a matter-of-fact way, as something he already possesses, when he declares that 'the grace of Christ' already 'has granted' (ܝܗܒ) to him the knowledge that the previous Christian writers 'were deprived of' (ܐܬܚܣܪ ܡܢ ܕܥܬܐ). This attitude to God's grace is different from what we find in the genuine writings of Ephrem.[31] Furthermore, when our author resorts to another popular literary convention, that of writing not on the author's own initiative, but as a response to a request (cf. *Cave of Treasures*, XLIV. 17),[32] no expression of modesty or reservation that usually accompany such assertions is to be found.[33] Again, this stands in contrast with the more complex approach of Ephrem himself, who not once engages in self-abasement and expresses reservations concerning his ability to convey divine truth.[34] These peculiar aspects of the *Cave of Treasures*'s claim for authority are conditioned by the image of Ephrem as prophet, whose possession of divine charisma is already assured.

Taken together with the fact that the author of the *Cave of Treasures* presents his exclusive genealogical information without resorting to the authority of earlier exegetical tradition, this claim for authority opens up the possibility to regard it as a reflection of the hidden tension between two kinds of knowl-

[29] Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors*, p. 340.

[30] For examples, see Riad, *Studies in the Syriac Preface*, pp. 214–15.

[31] Cf. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymnen de Paradiso und contra Julianum*, ed. and trans. by Beck, I. 15, p. 4, where Ephrem turns to God with a plea to protect him by the 'wings of your grace' (ܒܓܦܝܟ ܕܛܘܒܬܟ ܚܦܝ). Cf. also *Hymnen de Ecclesia*, ed. and trans. by Beck, IX. 2, p. 22.

[32] Ephrem himself uses this topos on several occasions; cf. *Commentary on Genesis*, prol. 1, *Select Prose Works*, trans. by Mathews and Amar, p. 67; *Discourses to Hypatius*, I, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, ed. and trans. by Mitchell, I, p. i.

[33] For examples of these two topoi in the works of Syriac writers, see Riad, *Studies in the Syriac Preface*, pp. 191–202.

[34] Cf. *Hymnen de Ecclesia*, ed. and trans. by Beck, IX. 1, 7, p. 22; *Hymnen de Paradiso*, ed. and trans. by Beck, I. 2, 16, p. 1; *Discourses to Hypatius*, I, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, ed. and trans. by Mitchell, I, pp. ii–iii; *Letter to Publius*, chs 24–25, *Select Prose Works*, trans. by Mathews and Amar, p. 355. For an analysis of this motif in the context of Ephrem's theological hermeneutics, see Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, pp. 112–17, 215–16.

edge — spiritual and scholastic — one of the fundamental inner conflicts characterizing many Christian (and non-Christian) cultures of Antiquity and of the Middle Ages, including Syriac. While spiritual knowledge is usually conferred upon an individual directly by God, as a proof of and a reward for his ascetic accomplishments, scholastic knowledge is acquired through the mediation of an educational framework. On Syrian soil this tension finds expression, for example, in the anonymous preface to the Syriac *Book of Steps*, where the author of this work is praised as a 'prophet' (ܢܒܝܐ) and particular stress is put on the fact that he received his powerful and spiritual teaching 'not from the thoughts of people or from the teaching of the wise' (ܠܐ ܡܢ ܚܫܒܢܐ ܕܒܢܝ ܐܢܫܐ ܐܘ ܡܢ ܠܐܠܦܢ ܚܟܝܡܐ), but 'through the power of the Holy Spirit alone' (ܐܠܐ ܒܚܝܠ ܪܘܚܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܒܠܚܘܕܘܗܝ).[35] As has been demonstrated by A. Becker, a similar tension can be found in the East-Syrian Christian culture during the sixth-seventh centuries, where difference in opinion on the subject of monastic life between its two main social institutions, the school and the monastery, found expression 'in their intellectual positions, especially in their notions of epistemology and their understanding of the accessibility of the divine'.[36]

The author of the *Cave of Treasures* has deliberately chosen to hide behind the name of Ephrem to avail himself of the authority of this universally revered Church Father. By so doing he resorted to a centuries-old literary strategy, inherited by early Christianity from its Jewish as well as Greco-Roman matrix, which remained much in vogue among Christians through Late Antiquity.[37] He was not the first among Syriac Christians to hide behind the name of Ephrem. Although it is difficult to date precisely the different works that constitute the rich pseudo-Ephremian dossier in Syriac, it is very likely that Ephrem's name was already used for such a purpose before the sixth century.[38]

It seems reasonable to suggest that this choice of Ephrem as a pen-name was conditioned both by his universal fame and by his being the only Syrian theologian equally recognized and celebrated by the two main factions within

[35] *Liber Graduum e codicibus Syriacus*, ed. by Kmosko, col. 4; *The Book of Steps*, trans. by Kitchen and Parmentier, p. 4.

[36] Becker, *Fear of God*, p. 171; see also pp. 188–194.

[37] On this, see Aland, 'The Problem of Anonymity and Pseudonymity'; Speyer, *Die Literarische Fälschung*; Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon*; Beatrice, 'Forgery, Propaganda and Power'; Gray, 'Forgery as an Instrument of Progress'.

[38] For an overview of Pseudo-Ephremian writing in Syriac, see Melki, 'Saint Éphrem le Syrien', pp. 44–88. One of the earliest works of this kind is the so-called *Testament of Ephrem*. For the text, see Ephrem the Syrian, *Sermones IV*, ed. and trans. by Beck, pp. 43–69.

Syriac-speaking Christianity during the sixth century — West-Syrian and East-Syrian. By ascribing his work to this foundational figure of Syrian Christendom our author was aiming to spread his message across the entire community of Syriac-speakers. As is evident from the history of the reception of his work, this choice turned out to be a canny one.[39]

By attributing his work to Ephrem, our author managed to project his argument far back into that period in the history of Syriac Christianity when the Syriac *œcumene* was united and not split along dogmatic lines. One can recognize this search on his part for a common ground also in his avoidance of explicit Christological discussions[40] — the main cause of the inner-Christian division in Syria during this period — as well as in his use of the old-fashioned incarnational language of 'clothing into body', traditional to Syria.[41]

Ephremian attribution also fits well with what might be characterized as an archaizing and anti-Hellenistic tendency in the way our author reworks biblical narrative. In a manner that sets him apart from many other Syrian writers of his time, the author of the *Cave of Treasures* stays oblivious to the influential tradition of Greek Christian chronography and historiography, and builds his version of the primeval history mainly on biblical foundations.[42] Although aware of the existence of the Greek historiographical tradition, he pays no attention to the figures and events of the Greco-Roman past. It appears that even in those rare cases when the author of the *Cave of Treasures* does make use of classical Greek motifs, he reworks them by removing any traits that might betray their origins.[43] Who else but Ephrem, whom Jacob of Serug characterized as 'an amaz-

[39] The *Cave of Treasures* was translated, in full or partially, into Arabic, Ethiopic, Coptic, and Georgian. On these versions, see Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors*, pp. 57–70.

[40] Such cases as the explicit anti-miaphysite statements found in the two passages of the Eastern recension (*Cave of Treasures*, XXI. 19 and XXIX. 10) are, in my view, later interpolations.

[41] Cf. *Cave of Treasures*, V. 8: 'He shall sojourn in a Virgin, and shall put on a body' (ܢܠܒܫ ܦܓܪܐ); *La Caverne des trésors*, ed. by Su-Min Ri, pp. 38–39. On this Christological language, see Brock, 'Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression'; Shchuryk, 'Lebēš pagrā''. On a similar strategy in the use of this archaizing terminology by another sixth-century Syriac writer, Daniel of Ṣalah, see Taylor, 'The Psalm Commentary of Daniel of Salah', pp. 76–77.

[42] It is uncertain whether the author of the *Cave of Treasures* knew Greek. On several occasions he does refer to unidentified 'Greek writers' (cf. *Cave of Treasures*, XLII. 6; XLIV. 14). In XVII. 22, he refers to the Septuagint. However, these references are hardly sufficient to serve as a proof of his mastery of Greek language.

[43] As an example of such reworking, the story of the invention of purple from *Cave of Treasures*, XXXVI. 1–8 could be mentioned. This tradition is well attested in Greco-Roman and Christian sources (cf. Pollux, *Onomasticon*, ed. by Dindorf, I. 45, vol. I, pp. 16–17; Malalas,

ing orator who surpassed the Greeks in his manner of speech',[44] would serve so well as the representative and spokesman for this indigenist world-view?

2. Priority of the Syriac Language

Attributing his work to Ephrem was not the only element in the author of the *Cave of Treasures*'s programme of rewriting Scripture in order to forge and promote a particular version of Syriac Christian identity that would be firmly rooted in the biblical past. An even more important and inventive contribution to that goal was the great stress he placed on proclaiming the primacy of Syriac over all other languages. In making that claim he resorted to two main arguments — one about Syriac as the primeval language, the other about its absence from the inscription on Jesus's cross.

Syriac as the Primeval Language

The author's first argument in favour of Syriac as the primeval language is presented in *Cave of Treasures*, XXIV. 9–11, the part of the narrative that rewrites the biblical account of the division of languages after the destruction of the tower of Babel, which took place after the descendants of Noah migrated to the land of Shinar (Genesis 11. 1–9):

> And in the days of Peleg all the tribes and families of the children of Noah gathered together, and went up from the East. And they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they all sat down there, while all speaking in the same language and the same speech. From Adam and until that time all the peoples spoke this language, that is to say, Syriac, which is Aramaic. And this language is the king of all languages. Now, the ancient writers have erred in that they said that Hebrew was the first (language), and in this matter they have mingled an ignorant mistake with their writing. For all the languages that exist in the world are derived from Syriac, and all the languages in books are mingled with it. In the writing of the Syrians the left

Chronographia, ed. by Thurn, II. 9, p. 25; *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. Dindorf, vol. I, pp. 78–79). It is also found in Syriac literature; cf. the fragment from Pseudo-Diocles in *Analecta syriaca*, ed. by de Lagarde, pp. 201–202. However, in distinction from all these sources that credit the philosopher Heracles and Tyrian king Phoenix with having discovered the dye, the author of *Cave of Treasures* ascribes this invention to the biblical king Hiram.

[44] ܡܪܕܘܬܐ ܕܟ ܟܝܠܗ ܕܡܬܒܗ ܕܝܘܢܝ; Jacob of Serug, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem*, ed. by Amar, pp. 32–33, l. 32a. Cf. Sozomen, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. by Bidez and Hansen, III. 16, pp. 127–28.

> hand stretches out to the right hand, and we all are drawing close to the right hand of God in order not to become children of the left hand. But with the Greeks, and the Romans, and the Hebrews, the right hand stretches out to the left.[45]

The main thrust of this passage is to assert that the 'one language' (MT שָׂפָה אֶחָת; Pesh ܠܫܢܐ ܚܕܐ) shared by all humanity before the tower of Babel was none other than Syriac. To substantiate this bold assertion our author claims — though without giving any examples — that all the languages in the world are derived from Syriac and thus contain some of its elements.

It is significant that the author of the *Cave of Treasures* does not simply affirm the primacy of the Syriac language but does so while explicitly rejecting a similar claim made by some unspecified 'ancient writers' concerning Hebrew. By doing that he challenges an extremely influential, centuries-old tradition shared by many Jews and Christians.

The idea of Hebrew as the primeval language was first formulated in Jewish circles during the Second Temple period. Its earliest attestation comes from the *Book of Jubilees*, where God restores to Abraham 'the language of creation', that is, the Hebrew language, which fell into disuse after the disaster of the tower of Babel.[46] Another tradition of this kind appears also in *4QExposition on the Patriarchs* (= 4Q464), one of the sectarian writings from Qumran, where Hebrew is mentioned in connection with Abraham and is said to triumph at the end of days and become again the language of all humanity.[47] Later on, the idea of Hebrew as the language of creation enjoyed wide support in rabbinic circles.[48] It reached its pinnacle in medieval Jewish mysticism, where, begin-

[45] Or^{A}: ܗܘ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܠܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܘܐܢܚܢ ܟܠܢ ܩܪܝܒܝܢ ܠܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܕܠܐ ܢܗܘܘܢ ܒܢܝ ܣܡܐܠܐ. ܐܠܐ ܥܡ ܝܘܢܝܐ ܘܥܡ ܪܘܡܝܐ ܘܥܡ ܥܒܪܝܐ ܗܘ ܝܡܝܢܐ ܠܝܡܝܢܐ ; ed. by Su-Min Ri, pp. 186–88.

[46] *The Book of Jubilees*, ed. by Vanderkam,12. 25–26 (trans. vol. II, p. 73: 'Then the Lord God said to me: "Open his mouth and his ears to hear and speak with his tongue in the revealed language". For from the day of the collapse it had disappeared from the mouth(s) of all mankind. I opened his mouth, ears, and lips and began to speak Hebrew with him — in the language of the creation').

[47] See Eshel and Stone, 'The Holy Language' (in Hebrew).

[48] Cf. *Genesis Rabbah*, 31. 8, in *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. by Freedman and Simon, I, p. 242;

ning with the *Sefer Yetzira*, the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet were interpreted as essential elements in the cosmogonical process.[49]

The notion of Hebrew primacy was also among the many ideas inherited by Early Christianity from its Jewish matrix, and it soon became widespread through the Christian *œcumene*. It is attested in a variety of Greek sources, Christian as well as pagan. Among the Greek authors of Late Antiquity that espoused it one can mention Julius Africanus,[50] Zosimos of Panopolis,[51] John Chrysostom,[52] and the *Apocalypse of Paul* (ch. 30). In the Latin West one of its earliest attestations comes from Jerome, who considered Hebrew to be 'the mother of all languages'.[53] A little later, this opinion was further supported by the authority of Augustine.[54] The primacy of Hebrew was a notion apparently popular also among the Christians of Egypt, as it is found in the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu[55] and in some Coptic magical texts.[56]

It is not clear when exactly this idea was first introduced into Syria. It could have become known to Syriac-speaking Christians through the Book of Jubilees, which it seems was translated into Syriac and circulated in the region.[57] Here it is worth noting that a later East-Syrian exegete such as Ishodad of Merv explicitly lists 'the books of Jubilees' (ܟܬܒܐ ܕܝܘܒܠܐ) as among those known to him that support the idea of Hebrew being the primeval language.[58]

Targum Neofiti to Genesis 11. 1, trans. by McNamara, p. 84; *y.Megillah*, ed. by Sussmann, 1. 8 [71b], col. 748; *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. by Friedlander, ch. 22, p. 161. For a discussion of this material, see Rubin, 'The Laguage of Creation', pp. 309–17.

[49] On this, see Idel, 'Reification of Language'.

[50] As Agapius of Mabbug testifies, 'Africanus the sage claims that Seth, the son of Adam, was the first to bring to light letters and taught writing and the Hebrew language' (وزعم افريقون الحكيم ان شيث ابن ادم هو اوّل من اظهرالحروف ودل على الكتاب واللسان العبرانى); Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae*, ed. by Wallraff, p. 43.

[51] See Zosimos of Panopolis, *On the Letter Omega*, ed. and trans. by Jackson, pp. 28–29.

[52] See John Chrysostom, *Hom. xxx in Genesim*, PG 53, col. 279.

[53] Jerome, *Commentarii in Prophetas Sophoniam*, ed. by Adriaen, III. 14–18, p. 708: 'linguam Hebraicam omnium linguarum esse matricem'.

[54] Cf. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. by Dyson, XVI. 11, pp. 714–15.

[55] John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, trans. by Charles, II. 1–3, p. 16; XXVII. 14–17, pp. 26–27.

[56] See Mirecki, 'The Coptic Wizard's Hoard', p. 442.

[57] See Tisserant, 'Fragments syriaques du Livre des Jubilés'; Vanderkam, *Textual and Historical Studies in the Book of Jubilees*, pp. 8–10.

[58] Ishodad of Merv, *Commentaire d'Išoʿdad de Merv sur [ ] Genèse*, ed. by Vosté and van den Eynde, vol. I, p. 134.

Wherever one might think of looking for the ultimate roots of this idea in Syria, we find its explicit expression already in the third century. The author of the *Pseudo-Clementines*, a Greek work written in Syria, speaking about the introduction of idolatry after the flood remarks that 'until that time the Hebrew language, which had been given to the human race by God, predominated'.[59] The popularization of this notion among Syriac Christians was facilitated by the early — no later than the first decade of the fifth century — translation of the *Pseudo-Clementines* into Syriac.[60]

Apart from the author of the *Pseudo-Clementines*, one of the earliest Syrian writers to espouse the idea of Hebrew as the primeval language seems to be Eusebius of Emesa, a fourth-century exegete born in Edessa. According to Jacob of Edessa, who quotes an otherwise unattested work of Eusebius, the latter explicitly affirmed the primacy of Hebrew by bringing forth the Hebrew etymological paronomasia involving the nouns 'man' (אִישׁ) and 'woman' (אִשָּׁה) in Genesis 2. 23 as a scriptural proof-text:

> And also that discourse by Eusebius, the bishop of Emesa, in which he demonstrates and decides that Hebrew is the first language, while confirming his opinion with the names of those men, who lived before the flood, and especially with what Adam said on account of Eve, his wife — 'this one shall be called woman, because out of man she was taken'. What sense there is in this saying for the one who wants to say that the Aramaic language was the first?! Let him speak, and dispute, and hear from us, if he wants, this sentence as it is pronounced in Hebrew — 'this one shall be called *iša*, because out of *iš* she was taken'. For the Hebrews call man *iš*, and woman — *iša*, so that it would be indeed known from it that it was Hebrew that Adam spoke, who composed this phrase and said: 'because of that the woman shall be called *iša*, since she was taken from the man, who is called *iš*'.[61]

[59] *Rekognitionen, in Rufins Übersetzung*, ed. by Rehm, I. 30. 5, p. 25: 'usque ad illud tempus divinitus humano generi data Hebraeorum lingua tenuit monarchiam'.

[60] In the Syriac version of the *Recognitions*, the original Greek sentence was rendered: 'and until that only one language was in use — Hebrew, beloved by God' (ܥܒܪܝܐ ܠܚܘܕ ܕܐܬ ܠܗ ܠܫܢܐ ܕܡܬܦܠܚ ܒܗ ܥܕ ܗܢܐ ܙܒܢܐ ܕܐܬ ܠܗ ܠܫܢܐ ܚܕ ܒܠܚܘܕ

There is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of this summary of Eusebius's argument by Jacob, given the latter's exactness in referring to the passage on the primacy of Hebrew from the *Pseudo-Clementines*, discussed above, which was quoted by him very close to the Syriac translation of this work.[62] There is also the fact that we do find a discussion by Eusebius of the Hebrew word-play behind Genesis 2. 23 among the surviving witnesses to his exegetical œuvre.[63] It is, however, far from certain whether the sentence attacking those who hold the view of Aramaic primacy belongs to Eusebius. In my opinion, this polemical clause should be regarded as belonging to Jacob and not as part of Eusebius's original argument. There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that the idea of Aramaic as the primeval language already existed during the lifetime of Eusebius, i.e. the first half of the fourth century. On the other hand, during Jacob's life-time, i.e. the second half of the seventh century, it did enjoy wide support among Syriac-speaking Christians. Moreover, the thrust of this attack fits well with Jacob's apologetic efforts on behalf of the originality of the Hebrew language.[64]

It is likely that the notion of Hebrew as the primeval language was also shared by Ephrem himself. Although we do not find it expressed unambiguously in his writings, at least one passage seems best understood in that sense. While discussing Genesis 11. 1–9 in his *Commentary on Genesis*, Ephrem states regarding the 'original language' (لعنه مدمحه) that after the tower of Babel it 'was lost by all the nations and remained with only one' (محد حِ حلمب عةحةه محد ي ـد سةعةمه).[65] Although Ephrem does not identify the nation that preserved this original language, the most likely interpretation of this sentence seems to be that it refers to the Jewish people and, accordingly, to the Hebrew language. This assumption is supported by the fact that nowhere in his authentic writings does Ephrem promote the idea of Syriac as the primeval language. Moreover, in the fourth-century intellectual context, where Hebrew was the only attested candidate in discussions on the primeval language, a statement of

:ةمةه ةهةمه ةمهةهة ةمه لحلل ةمحةه ةمه ةحمح لهل ممحد ةه .ةمةه ةهةم لحلل هةمحمد ⁘هممهةه مه ممحةهة ةمحمح لحل لحلل ةمح; Wright, 'Two Epistles of Mâr Jacob', p. ٥٦.

[62] See Wright, 'Two Epistles of Mâr Jacob', p. ٥٦.

[63] See the fragment no. 7 ad Genesis 2. 23, ed. and discussed in Romeny, *A Syrian in Greek Dress*, pp. 203–06.

[64] On this, see Adler, 'Jacob of Edessa', p. 154.

[65] Ephrem the Syrian, *In Genesim et in Exodum commentari*, ed. by Tonneau, VIII. 3, vol. I, p. 66 (Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Prose Works*, ed. by McVey, pp. 147–48 — modified).

such ambiguity should almost certainly be understood as relating to this language and not to Syriac.

The idea of Hebrew primacy was still popular in sixth century Syria at the time of the *Cave of Treasures*'s composition. Jacob of Serug testifies to that in the second of his *Memre on the Apostle Thomas in India*, where he paraphrases the part of the *Acts of Thomas* (chs 5–8) in which the apostle meets the Jewish flute-girl. Jacob adds a detail not found in the original text of the *Acts* and says that the apostle cursed the butler who smote him on his cheek 'in Hebrew' — 'in that language in which his Lord cursed the serpent in Eden'.[66] Another sixth-century writer, a certain Mar Aba, an East-Syrian historiographer whose work survived only partially in Arabic translation, also acknowledges Hebrew to be 'the first language in the world' (اوّل لسان فى الدّنيا), although he is aware of those who hold Syriac to be the first one.[67] The notion of Hebrew as the primeval language retained its appeal for at least some Syriac-speaking Christians well after the time of the *Cave of Treasures*, as one can see from the writings of Jacob of Edessa, who was its most prominent apologist during the seventh century.[68] All these examples demonstrate, in my view, that on the question of the primeval language Hebrew originality was the prevailing opinion in late ancient Syria.

At this point, I would like to comment briefly on the tendency of several scholars to underestimate the importance among Syriac Christians of the idea of Hebrew primacy and to present the notion of Syriac originality as supported by the majority of Syriac writers. M. Rubin, for example, notes that the view on Syriac primacy held by Theodoret was 'almost the rule amongst the Syriac writers'.[69] A similar assertion, about the idea of the originality of Hebrew being 'a minority option' among Syriac writers, has recently been made by Y. Moss.[70] While these claims may be true for the later, post-seventh century Syriac tradition, they are by no means accurate regarding Late Antiquity. In fact, the only Syriac-speaking author known to me who affirmed the primacy of the Syriac language during this period is the author of the *Cave of Treasures*. In view of

[66] ܗܘ ܕܒܗ ܠܫܢܐ ܕܒܗ ܡܪܗ ܕܝܠܗ ܠܚܘܐ ܒܥܕܢ ܣܡ ܠܗ ܠܥܠܡ ܕܚܘܐ ܠܥܠ ܒܝ ܗܘ ܠܫܢܐ ܕܒܗ ܡܪܗ ܕܝܠܗ ܠܚܘܐ ܒܥܕܢ ܣܡ ܠܗ ܠܥܠ ܒܝ ܗܘ ܠܫܢܐ ܕܒܗ ܡܪܗ ܕܝܠܗ ܠܚܘܐ ܒܥܕܢ ܣܡ ܠܗ ܠܥܠ ܒܝ ܗܘ ܠܫܢܐ ܕܒܗ ܡܪܗ ܕܝܠܗ ܠܚܘܐ ܒܥܕܢ ܣܡ ܠܗ ܠܥܠ ܒܝ ; Jacob of Serug, *Drei Gedichte über den Apostel Thomas*, ed. by Strothmann, p. 250.

[67] Macler, 'Extraits de la Chronique de Maribas Kaldoyo', p. 502, l. 8.

[68] See Adler, 'Jacob of Edessa', pp. 153–54.

[69] Rubin, 'The Laguage of Creation', p. 322.

[70] Moss, 'The Language of Paradise', p. 120.

the instances discussed above of acknowledged Hebrew primacy during this period, such undifferentiated claims that project the situation at the later stages of development of the tradition back to earlier ones seem to be unwarranted.

* * *

The virtual consensus on the originality of Hebrew began to crack during the fifth century, that is, even before the time of the *Cave of Treasures*. One of the first Christian thinkers to hold a different opinion on the subject was Theodoret, a bishop of the city of Cyrrhus in Syria, a prolific writer who was active during the first half of the fifth century. In the section of his *Questions on Genesis* dealing with the tower of Babel and the division of tongues, Theodoret expresses the following opinion about the primeval language:

> Which is the most ancient language? The names give the clue; Adam, Cain, Abel, and Noah belong to Syriac. Speakers of Syriac normally refer to red earth as 'adamtha', so Adam means 'earthy' or 'made of dust'; Cain 'acquisition', for when he sang God's praises, Adam said, 'Thanks to God I have acquired a man'; Abel 'grief', since his was the first death ever seen and he was the first to cause his parents pain; and Noah 'rest'.[71]

Further on, Theodoret addresses the issue of Hebrew primacy and disagrees with those exegetes according to whom the name 'Hebrews' was derived from Heber (see Genesis 10. 21–25), the person who supposedly preserved the '*προτέρᾳ φωνῇ*' ('original language'), that is Hebrew.[72] Theodoret offers an alternative etymological explanation for this ethnonym and concludes the discussion on a rather conciliatory note, remarking that the whole issue is irrelevant to matters of faith.

It is noteworthy that the argument used by Theodoret in favour of Syriac originality seems to be free of any polemical overtones and is based purely on such linguistic reasoning as the similarity between Aramaic words and several personal names in the first chapters of Genesis. One might wonder, however, whether in making this claim, extraordinary for his times, Theodoret might not be driven by some other agenda than mere scholarly inquisitiveness. I believe

[71] Theodoret, *On Genesis and Exodus*, ed. by Petruccione, ch. 60, pp. 122–25: '*Ποία γλῶσσα ἀρχαιοτέρα; Δηλοῖ τὰ ὀνόματα· Ἀδὰμ γάρ, καὶ Κάϊν, καὶ Ἄβελ, καὶ Νῶε τῆς Σύρων ἴδια γλώττης· ἀδαμθὰ γὰρ τὴν ἐρυθρὰν γῆν ἔθος τοῖς Σύροις καλεῖν. Ἀδὰμ τοίνυν ἢ ὁ γήϊνος ἢ ὁ χοϊκὸς ἑρμηνεύται, καὶ Κάϊν κτῆσις· τοῦτο δὲ ὑμνῶν ὁ Ἀδὰμ εἴρηκεν, ἐκτησάμην ἄνθρωπον διὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ· καὶ Ἄβελ πένθος· πρῶτος γὰρ οὗτος ὤφθη νεκρὸς καὶ πρῶτος τοῖς γεγεννηκόσι προὐξένησε πένθος· καὶ Νῶε ἀνάπαυσις*'.

[72] Theodoret, *On Genesis and Exodus*, ed. by Petruccione, ch. 62, pp. 126–29.

there are grounds for suggesting that he was. We know that Theodoret had close ties with the Syriac-speaking world. He was familiar with the Syriac language and even spent part of his youth living among Syriac monks. As has been noted by scholars, there is a discernible tendency on Theodoret's part to present and promote himself as a representative of the widely respected Syrian asceticism.[73] Taking this fact into consideration, it seems not unlikely that this at first glance purely academic expression of Syriac primacy might ultimately be rooted in Theodoret's personal agenda of self-promotion.

There is a certain possibility that even before Theodoret the cause of Syriac primacy may have been advanced by his teacher Theodore of Mopsuestia. A number of Syriac Christian and Muslim sources transmit this opinion under the name of Theodore.[74] In his recent analysis of this tradition, Y. Moss inclines to accepting the testimony of these sources as genuine.[75] In my view, however, given the late nature of all these witnesses and the lack of unanimity on this issue among East-Syrian transmitters of the Theodoretan legacy, it seems impossible at the present time to resolve satisfactorily the question of the authenticity of this tradition. It might just as well be a product of late inner-Syrian development, when this controversial idea was ascribed to Theodore, the ultimate for the East-Syrian exegetical tradition authority, in order to give it more credibility. Certainly, recovery of the lost part of Theodore's *Commentary on Genesis* that deals with the story of the tower of Babel would help solve this problem.

The notion of Syriac as the primeval language during Late Antiquity was not confined only to Christian circles. We find a similar claim of Aramaic primacy in the contemporary Jewish tradition. It comes from the Babylonian Talmud, where, in the treatise *Sanhedrin*, Rabbi Judah says in Rav's name that 'the first man spoke Aramaic', referring as proof to Psalm 139. 17, the verse that features several forms unusual for biblical Hebrew, lending themselves to be easily understood as Aramaisms.[76] This affirmation of Aramaic as the primeval lan-

[73] On this, see Urbainczyk, '"The Devil Spoke Syriac to Me"'; for an important discussion of Theodoret's cultural identity, see also Millar, 'Theodoret of Cyrrhus'.

[74] These sources are: (1) the anonymous eighth-century *Diyarbekir Commentary*, in *Le Commentaire sur Gen.–Ex. 9,32*, ed. by Van Rompay, pp. 68–69 (trans. pp. 88–89); (2) ninth-century Ishodad of Merv, *Commentaire d'Išo'dad de Merv sur [...] Genèse*, ed. by Vosté and van den Eynde, 1. 1, pp. 135 (trans. p. 147); (3) the tenth-century Muslim historian Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitâb al-Fihrist*, ed. by Flügel, Roediger, and Mueller, I. 1, vol. II (1872), p. 12. On the passage from al-Nadīm, see discussion by Samir, 'Théodore de Mopsueste', pp. 360–63.

[75] See Moss, 'The Language of Paradise', pp. 132–35.

[76] *b.Sanhedrin* 38b (MS Munich 95): א' רב יהוד' א' רב אד' הראשון בלשון ארמי סיפר. For a

guage stands alone in the rabbinic corpus and certainly demands explanation. It is not easy to contextualize the claim. On the one hand, given that this tradition is attested only in the Babylonian Talmud and is attributed there to Rav, a third-century sage who was active in Babylonia, one may think it to be a reflection of the phenomenon of 'local patriotism' noted by scholars that characterized the attitude of the Babylonian rabbis toward their homeland.[77] On the other hand, when considered in the context of the Talmudic sugiya where it appears and where Adam is characterized as a 'heretic' (מין), this tradition may be understood as being polemically motivated and aimed against some groups, such as Gnostics or orthodox Christians, that ascribed to Adam an elevated status.[78]

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One of the proofs of Syriac primacy brought forward by the author of the *Commentary on Genesis* is based on the right-directed way of writing, supposedly unique to Syrians, which, it is claimed, sets it apart from the left-directed manner that characterizes Hebrew, Greek, and Latin scripts. This quasi-linguistic argument was, most likely, invented by our author as no Syriac or other Christian writer before the sixth century makes use of it. Remarkable is that it is not based on any actual features of the four respective scripts as known to us and thus seems to be totally fictitious.[79] Thus, nothing similar to this claim is found in Jacob of Edessa's categorization of languages also based on their way of writing, where a distinction is drawn between such languages written from left to right as Greek, Latin, Egyptian, and Armenian, and those written from right to left — Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, and Persian.[80] As one can see, no unique place is ascribed to the Syriac language in this classification.

This unusual argument makes even more evident the polemical intention that underlines the promotion of Syriac primacy by our author, as the superior position ascribed to Syriac vis-à-vis Greek, Latin, and Hebrew is based on the superiority of right side over left. The dichotomy of right and left is one of the universal constants of human culture. In many religious traditions of Antiquity distinction between these directions was used to indicate positive and negative

detailed analysis of this tradition, see Moss, 'The Language of Paradise', pp. 123–26.

[77] On this phenomenon, see Gafni, 'Expressions and Types of "Local Patriotism"'.

[78] See Moss, 'The Language of Paradise', pp. 124–25.

[79] A recent attempt by van Reeth to explain this enigmatic claim by some actual features of the Estrangela script does not seeem convincing; see Van Reeth, 'L'araméen', p. 141.

[80] See *Les Homiliae Cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, ed. and trans. by Brière, pp. 196–97.

values. This distinction, when left was marked as the bad side and right as the good, is found already in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ecclesiastes 10. 2), and becomes quite common in post-biblical Judaism and Christianity.[81]

Syriac Christian culture inherited this dichotomy from its Jewish and Greek Christian matrixes. Identification with the left side was generally used to mark those who were perceived as enemies of God or Christians. For example, Ephrem says about Judas that he 'became the head of the left side' (ܪܫܐ ܠܫܡܐܠ ܐܬܥܒܕ).[82] The epithet 'sons of the left side' (ܒܢܝ ܫܡܐܠ), used by the author of the *Cave of Treasures*, was applied by several Syriac writers to the sinners, who were condemned by God to eternal punishment, in the eschatological scenario described in Matthew 25. 31–46.[83] In the Syriac *Life of Simeon the Stylite* (B), we find a Zoroastrian priest, who mercilessly persecuted Christians, being called 'the son of the left side' (ܒܪ ܕܫܡܐܠ ܐܝܬ).[84]

Furthermore, identification with the left direction was applied not only to the human enemies of God, but to the demonic forces as well. Thus, in the Syriac *Acts of Philip* the apostle persuades the people of Carthage to convert to Christianity with these words — 'Renounce Satan [...]. Flee from the darkness [...]. Quit the destroying left hand' (ܫܡܐܠ ܚܒܠܢܝܬܐ ܐܫܬܒܘ).[85] Later on, Ephrem calls the forces of evil, comprised by demons, Satan, Death, and Sheol, 'the party of the left side' (ܟܬ ܕܫܡܐܠ ܟܬ).[86] In the *Testament of Ephrem*, 'the chiefs of the armies of the left side' (ܪܒ ܫܠܝ ܕܫܡܐܠ ܓ) are mentioned alongside 'demons and archons' (ܪܘܚܐ ܘܫܐ) as representatives of the demonic powers that were summoned by the sorcerers of Egypt against Moses.[87] In the Syriac *Life*

[81] For Jewish tradition, see Philo, *Quis Her.*, 209, in *Philo*, ed. by Colson and Whitaker, IV, pp. 386–87; *Test. of Benj.*, 10. 6, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. by Charlesworth, I, p. 828; *Apoc., of Abraham*, 27, 29 (vol. I, pp. 702–04); *Test. of Abraham* (A), 12. 12; 13. 9, (vol. I, pp. 889–90); *Cant. Rabbah*, I. 9. 1, in *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. by Freedman and Simon, IX, p. 66. For Christianity, see Matthew 25. 31–46; *Hypost. of Archons*, 95. 34–96. 3, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. by Robinson, p. 168. See also Grundmann, 'δεξιός'; Court, 'Right and Left'; Lloyd, 'Right and Left in Greek Philosophy'.

[82] Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymnen contra Haereses*, ed. and trans. by Beck, XXII. 11, p. 81, l. 24.

[83] Ephrem the Syrian, *Opera omnia*, ed. by Assemani and Benedictus, III (1743), p. 244. Cf. also *Acta sanctorum martyrum orientalium et occidentalium*, ed. by Assemani, II (1748), p. 209.

[84] *Acta martyrum et sanctorum*, ed. by Bedjan, IV (1894), p. 599.

[85] *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, ed. by Wright, I, p. ܗ (trans. vol. II, p. 80).

[86] Ephrem the Syrian, *Carmina Nisibena*, ed. and trans. by Beck, XXXVI. 18, p. 14.

[87] Ephrem the Syrian, *Sermones IV*, ed. and trans. by Beck, p. 64, l. 789–90.

of Simeon the Stylite (A), demons are called 'the sons of the left side' (ܒܢܝ ܣܛܪܐ ܕܫܡܐܠ).[88] In a similar vein, Jacob of Serug in one of his homilies on Nativity refers to the demons that accompany Satan as 'devils, sons of the left side' (ܕܝܘܬܐ ܕܣܛܪ ܫܡܐܠ) and describes the demonic forces that were disturbed by the virginal birth of Jesus as 'the party of the left side' (ܟܬܬ ܕܣܛܪ ܫܡܐܠ).[89] In another homily of his, Jacob calls Satan 'the commander of the left side' (ܪܫܝܫ ܕܫܡܐܠ).[90]

Demonological connotations of the association with the left side in our text become even more apparent if we take into consideration the Iranian provenance of the *Cave of Treasures*. It is known that in several Semitic languages the cognates of Syr. *semālā* in addition to the main meaning 'left' may also designate the northern direction. Thus, in Biblical Hebrew the noun *śᵉmō'l* besides meaning 'left' is used at times to indicate the north.[91] In classical Arabic *šimāl* is used both for 'left' and for the northern wind.[92] In the Mari letters we find mentions of *Bini(meš)-Simaal*, the 'northern' tribal group.[93] At the same time, in the Zoroastrian cosmological model the northern direction (*abāxtar*) was considered to be the dwelling place of Ahreman and the demonic forces, where hell is located.[94] That this connection between the left direction and the north was known to the Syriac Christians of Iran, testifies the Persian *Diatessaron*, IV. 3, where a reference to 'the North, that is the left side' (شمال یعنی کنار چپ) is found.[95]

All this demonstrates that in his undertaking of establishing superiority of the Syriac language over Hebrew, Greek and Latin, the author of the *Cave of Treasures* does not limit himself to the idea of Syriac as the primeval language, but resorts to demonization of these three languages and, by implication, of their speakers. It is important to stress at this point that our author tries to challenge authority not only of the Hebrew language, but of Greek and Latin as well. Such polemical usage of linguistic argument based on the formal features of Syriac script is unique to our author and stands out as one of his contributions to the tradition of Syriac apologetics.

[88] *Acta sanctorum martyrum orientalium et occidentalium*, ed. by Assemani, II (1748), p. 232.

[89] *S. Martyrii*, ed. by Bedjan, pp. 778, 787.

[90] Jacob of Serug, *Six homélies*, ed. by Rilliet, ch. 8, p. 570.

[91] Cf. Genesis 14. 15; Joshua 19. 27; Job 23. 8–9; Ezekiel 16. 46.

[92] See Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, IV: *Ṣād-sīn* (1872), pp. 1600–01.

[93] *Correspondance de Šamši-Addu et de ses fils*, ed. by Dossin, 60. 9, p. 116.

[94] For the references, see Tafazzoli, 'Bāḵtar', p. 539.

[95] *Il Diatessaron persiano*, ed. by Messina, p. 288.

Syriac and the Trilingual Inscription on the Cross

In pursuit of his desire to raise the prestige of the Syriac language, the author of the *Cave of Treasures* did not confine himself to a declaration of its superiority as the original language of humanity; he went even further and gave to the idea of Syriac supremacy an original and unprecedented expression. In *Cave of Treasures*, LIII. 20–27, the following argument, related to the story of Jesus's execution and death, is expounded by him:

> And when Joseph brought him down from the Cross, he took away that inscription which was spread out above his head, that is, over the cross of Christ, because it had been written by Pilate in Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew. And why did Pilate write in it no word of the Syrians? Because the Syrians participated in no way whatsoever in (the shedding of) the blood of Christ. And Pilate was a wise man and a lover of the truth, (and) he did not want to write a lie as wicked judges do, but he did according to what is written in the law of Moses — (he wrote) about those who condemn the innocent, the words of the killers of Christ. And Pilate wrote the word of the killers of Christ and hung above him: Herod — the Greek, Caiaphas — the Hebrew, and Pilate — the Latin. But the Syrians had no part in his murder, as to this testifies Abgar, the king of Edessa, who wanted to take Jerusalem and destroy it because the Jews crucified Christ.[96]

In this passage the author bases his apology of the Syriac language and Syriac nation on the passage from the Gospel of John (19. 19–20) where it is said about Pilate that at the crucifixion he placed on Jesus's cross an inscription that featured the phrase 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews', written in the three languages — Hebrew, Latin, and Greek.

Unusual in this treatment of the scriptural verses is that the absence of Syriac from the trilingual inscription gives our author an opportunity to exonerate the Syrians as a nation of the crime of deicide. No comparable treatment of the trilingual inscription in John 19. 19–20 is found in the works of Syriac or any other Christian exegetes before the time of the *Cave of Treasures*. When we do

[96] Or^{A}: ܘܟܕ ܐܝܬ ܠܗ ܠܝܘܣܦ ܡܢ ܥܠ ܨܠܒܐ ܢܣܒ ܗܘ ܟܬܒܐ ܕܐܬܦܪܣ ܥܠ ܪܫܗ ܐܝ ܗܘ ܥܠ ܨܠܒܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܐܬܟܬܒ ܒܝܘܢܝܐ ܘܒܠܐܝܬ ܘܒܥܒܪܝܐ ܘܠܡܢܐ ܠܐ ܟܬܒ ܦܝܠܛܘܣ ܒܗ ܡܠܬܐ ܕܣܘܪܝܝܐ ܐܠܐ ܕܠܐ ܫܪܟܘ ܣܘܪܝܝܐ ܒܕܡܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܒܟܠ ܐܘܟܡܐ ܘܦܝܠܛܘܣ ܓܒܪܐ ܚܟܝܡ ܘܪܚܡ ܫܪܪܐ ܘܠܐ ܨܒܐ ܠܡܟܬܒ ܣܘܟܠ ܐܝܟ ܕܝܢܐ ܐܝܫ ܕܥܒܕܝܢ ܐܠܐ ܐܝܟ ܕܟܬܝܒ ܒܢܡܘܣܐ ܕܡܘܫܐ ܥܠ ܐܠܝܢ ܕܡܪܫܥܝܢ ܠܙܕܝܩ ܡܠܝ ܕܐܡܪ ܕܐܠܝܢ ܗܢ ܕܩܛܠܘ ܠܡܫܝܚܐ ܘܦܝܠܛܘܣ ܟܬܒ ܡܠܬܐ ܕܩܛܠܝ ܡܫܝܚܐ ܘܥܠ ܠܗ ܠܗ ܠܗܪܘܕܣ ܝܘܢܝܐ ܘܠܩܝܦܐ ܥܒܪܝܐ ܘܠܦܝܠܛܘܣ ܠܐ ܠܗ ܠܝܘܣܦ ܒܩܛܠܗ ܐܠܐ ܣܘܪܝܝܐ ܠܐ ܗܘ ܠܗܘܢ ܒܗ ܡܕܡ ܐܝܟ ܕܣܗܕ ܐܒܓܪ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܐܕܣܐ ܕܒܥܐ ܕܢܣܒ ܠܝܪܘܫܠܡ ܘܢܫܬܝܗ ܡܛܠ ܕܝܗܘܕܝܐ ܨܠܒܘ ܠܡܫܝܚܐ; *La Caverne des trésors*, ed. by Su-Min Ri, pp. 450–52.

come across this passage being handled by Syrian authors, it serves mostly as an argument in anti-Jewish polemic, when the three languages are used by Pilate providentially to inform all the nations of the world about the guilt of the Jews as the killers of Christ. In this way these verses are explained, for example, by Theodore of Mopsuestia and by the author of the *Sermons on the Holy Week*, the work ascribed erroneously to Ephrem.[97]

* * *

It is highly significant that our author twice, in this as well as in the previously analysed passage, attempts to challenge the prestige of the three particular languages — Hebrew, Greek, and Latin — while putting them in opposition to Syriac. While in *Cave of Treasures*, XXIV. 9–11, he denounces these languages basing on their external features, in this passage his negative rhetoric against them escalates as he takes it to an even deeper theological level by blaming the speakers of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin for participation in the killing of Christ. The polemical intention of these barely disguised attacks on these three languages is manifest. Let us try to perceive the goals pursued by the author of the *Cave of Treasures* in waging this polemic, which has no precedent in the works of Christian writers before him.

The presence of the Hebrew language in this list is quite understandable if we take into consideration the general anti-Jewish thrust of the *Cave of Treasures* and the supercessionist ideology of its author.[98] The denunciation of the Hebrew language fits well with the strong anti-Jewish rhetoric of the author against Jews as the killers of Christ.[99] As to the primacy of Hebrew, it seems he was not alone in his unwillingness to accept this claim. In addition to the already mentioned Theodoret, there is evidence that the idea of Hebrew as the primeval language met with a certain amount of opposition in the Syriac-speaking milieu. It comes from the apocryphal composition known as the *Apocalypse of Paul*. In this work the apostle during his heavenly ascent arrives at the heavenly Jerusalem, where he beholds the angels singing hallelujah to God.

[97] For Theodore, see Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentarius in Evangelium Iohannis Apostoli*, ed. by Vosté, p. 336; for a Pseudo-Ephremian text, see *Ephraem Syrus: Sermones in Hebdomadam Sanctam*, ed. and trans. by Beck, pp. 62–63.

[98] Cf. *Cave of Treasures*, XIX. 13; XXXI. 28; XLIII. 9; LII. 17; XLVIII. 29 [Oc]; L. 13–14; LII. 1; LII. 17. This aspect of the *Cave of Treasures* is thoroughly analysed in Chapter 2 of my doctoral dissertation.

[99] Cf. *Cave of Treasures*, XLVIII. 13–14; L. 4; LI. 12; LIII. 6 [Or].

He enquires of the angel accompanying him about the word's meaning and is told that '*Halleluia* is spoken in Hebrew, the language of God and angels'. This account is attested in the long Latin recension of the *Apocalypse*, which is held by scholars to represent the oldest and best textual witness of the lost Greek original.[100] However, when we turn to the Syriac translation of the *Apocalypse*, the second part of the angel's answer is absent; only the Hebrew etymology of the word 'hallelujah' is offered to the apostle.[101] One possible explanation for this omission is that the Syriac translator had a different Greek *Vorlage* before him. But in my opinion it may result from a deliberate decision on his side to downplay the idea of Hebrew as the primeval language.

Nevertheless, the negative mention of the two other languages — Greek and Latin — alongside Hebrew is striking and is in need of explanation. One possible way of explaining this rhetoric would be to suggest that its main thrust lies in the challenge our author is trying to pose to the doctrine of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin as the three sacred languages. This doctrine received its most developed expression in Europe during the Middle Ages, but its earliest attestations can be found already in Late Antiquity.[102] One of its most ancient formulations belongs to Isidore of Seville, a Latin Church Father who was active from the second half of the sixth century to the first decades of the seventh. In the section dealing with languages in his *Etymologies*, Isidore claims:

> There are three sacred languages — Hebrew, Greek, and Latin — which are pre-eminent throughout the world. On the cross of the Lord the charge laid against him was written at Pilate's command in these three languages. Hence — and because of the obscurity of the Sacred Scriptures — a knowledge of these three languages is necessary, so that, whenever the wording of one of the languages presents any doubt about a name or an interpretation, recourse may be had to another language.[103]

[100] *Apocalypse of Paul*, ed. by Silverstein and Hilhorst, ch. 30, pp. 134–35: 'Dicitur alleluia Ebrayca loquella dei et angelorum'. In the surviving Greek version of the *Apocalypse*, which is a later abridgement of a longer Greek text, this idea is expressed in a less pronounced but still recognizable way: 'λέγεται Ἑβραϊστὶ θεβὲλ μαρημαθά, λαλιὰ τῷ θεῷ τῷ θεμελιοῦντι τὰ παντά, δοξάσωμεν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό'; *Apocalypses apocryphae*, ed. by Tischendorf, p. 56.

[101] ܗܠܠܘܝܐ ܕܐܡܪ ܒܥܒܪܝܐ ܠܫܢ̈ܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܘܡܠ̈ܐܟܐ; Ricciotti, 'Apocalypsis Pauli syriace', p. 130.

[102] On this, see Hilhorst, 'The Prestige of Hebrew', pp. 782–83; Thomson, 'SS. Cyril and Methodius'.

[103] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum*, ed. by Lindsay, IX. 1. 3, vol. I, p. 343: 'Tres sunt autem linguae sacrae: Hebraea, Graeca, Latina, quae toto orbe maxime excellunt. His enim tribus lin-

The roots of the idea about the privileged position held by the three languages of the superscription on Jesus's cross go back to the fourth and fifth centuries, when the notion of their special merit began to develop in the Latin West. Thus Jerome in one of his letters, while boasting about the universal dissemination and success of the Gospel, draws particular attention to its spread among the Jews, Greeks, and Romans, 'peoples which the Lord had dedicated to his faith by the title written on his cross'.[104] Later on, Augustine characterizes these three languages as the 'most excellent in the whole world'.[105] Further Latin writers also offered their explanations for the reason these three languages were chosen for the inscription. According to Hilary of Poitiers, they have this right of precedence because the mystery of God's will and the expectation of the blessed Kingdom were preached most of all in these three languages.[106] For Augustine, these three languages were singled out because of their importance — Hebrew because of the Jews' glory in the Law of God, Greek because of the wisdom of the Greeks, and Latin because of the world dominion of the Romans.[107]

It might be that this idea of the exclusive status of the three languages of the cross received some degree of recognition in the Christian East as well. For example, for Cyril of Alexandria the reason for the trilingual inscription on the cross is that these languages are 'the most widely known of all'.[108] In the Syriac version of *Transitus Mariae*, the story of Mary's Assumption is said to appear miraculously written in the three languages — Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.[109]

Nevertheless, despite these expressions of the idea of the three sacred languages being contemporary with or even preceding the time of the *Cave of*

guis super crucem Domini a Pilato fuit causa eius scripta. Unde et propter obscuritatem sanctarum Scripturarum harum trium linguarum cognitio necessaria est, ut ad alteram recurratur dum siquam dubitationem nominis vel interpretationis sermo unius linguae adtulerit' (Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, trans. by Barney and others, p. 191). The idea is repeated in Isidore of Seville, *Liber numerorum 4.17*, PL 83, col. 182.

[104] Jerome, *Epistulae*, ed. by Hilberg, vol. I: *Epistulae I–LXX*, no. 60, l. 4, pp. 552–53: 'quas nationes fidei suae in crucis titulo dominus dedicauit'.

[105] Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in psalmos*, ed. by Dekkers, *In Psalmum LVIII enarratio*, 1. 1, pp. 729–30: 'Nam cum Dominis crucifigeretur, titulus inscriptus est a Pilato et positus: *Rex Iudaeorum*, tribus linguis, Hebraea, Graeca et Latina; quae linguae toto orbe maxime excellunt'.

[106] Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus super Psalmos*, ed. by Zingerle, *Instructio Psalmorum*, ch. 15, p. 13.

[107] Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis Evangelium tractatus CXXIV*, ed. by Willems, 117. 4, p. 653. Cf. also Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo de Passione Domini*, PL 38, col. 1085.

[108] Cyril of Alexandria, *In D. Joannis evangelium*, ed. by Pusey, III, p. 85.

[109] *Apocrypha Syriaca*, ed. by Lewis, pp. لد, (trans. p. 19).

Treasures's author, it is far from certain that this concept was known during the sixth century in the Sasanian part of Mesopotamia, where the *Cave of Treasures* was composed. Even if so, it is debatable whether it was popular enough to provoke such an intensive rebuttal. Since no direct evidence is available to us, the explanatory force of this hypothesis remains weak. There is, however, another direction of thought that might help us appreciate better the driving force behind our author's challenge to the Greek language. To follow it, we need to briefly address the issue of the status of the Syriac language vis-à-vis Greek during the fifth and sixth centuries.

As has been noted by scholars, starting from the second half of the fourth century, after the official conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, the Syriac Christians came to be more and more influenced by the patterns of life and thought of their Western Greek-speaking coreligionists. This Westernization of Syriac Christianity proceeded different levels. One of its main manifestations was a dramatic increase in translations from Greek into Syriac.[110] To adequately convey Greek words and concepts for which no original Syriac equivalents existed, translators introduced many Greek loan-words into the Syriac vocabulary. Sometimes, especially in the later stages of this translation movement, Syriac syntax itself was violated in order to correspond to that of the Greek original. This process caused a negative reaction from those Syrians who saw in it a threat to the purity of their native language. One of the earliest objections to this aspect of the expansion of Greek culture comes from the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, ascribed to John of Apamea, a fifth-century Syriac author.[111] In this work, we find the following expression of resentment against the detrimental results of the influence of the Greek language upon Syriac:

> One should say also this, that even the Syriac language was greatly corrupted by contact with and closeness to the Greek language. And the manners of its eloquence were forgotten even by the people for whom it was the native language.[112]

A similar feeling seems to underlie the words of the anonymous author of the preface to the Syriac *Book of Steps*, who praises the book's writer for the simplic-

[110] On this, see Brock, 'Greek and Syriac'.

[111] The authorship of this work by John is far from certain; see Van Rompay, 'The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation', pp. 631–32. It should be emphasized, however, that the earliest textual witness of this work (London, British Museum, MS Add. 14597), is dated by the year 569; see *Kohelet-Kommentar*, ed. by Strothmann, p. xxi.

[112] ܗܘ ܐܡܪ ܐܦ ܗܢܐ ܕܐܦ ܠܫܢܐ ܣܘܪܝܝܬܐ ܐܬܚܒܠ ܒܩܪܒܐ ܘܒܫܘܬܦܘܬܐ ܕܠܫܢܐ ܝܘܢܝܬܐ. ܘܐܦ ܫܘܒܚܗ ܕܡܠܠܬܗ ܐܬܫܟܚ ܐܦ ܠܓܒܝ ܐܢܫܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܗܘ ܠܫܢܗ ܝܠܝܦܬܐ.; *Kohelet-Kommentar*, ed. by Strothmann, p. 4.

ity and purity of its style, which remind those of 'the ancient Syriac language' (ܠܫܢܐ ܣܘܪܝܝܐ ܥܬܝܩܐ ,ܐ ܠܫܢܐ ܣܘܪܝܝܐ ܩܕܡܝܐ), uncorrupted by scholastic jargon. It appears from the preface writer's remarks that the doctrine of the author of the *Book of Steps* was not derived 'from the teachings of wise men' (ܠܐ ܡܢ ܡܠܦܢܐ ܚܟܝܡܐ ܐܠܐ ܡܢ ܟܬܒܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ) and that his book 'was not written skilfully' (ܠܐ ܒܡܗܝܪ ܟܬܝܒ ܗܘ).[113]

The purity of the Syriac language was not the only issue at stake. Occasionally, antagonism between proponents of the Syriac and Greek languages would develop on another, more significant level of theological discourse. This tension is expressed most visibly by Philoxenus of Mabbug, in the *Letter to the Monks of Senoun*, written in the third decade of the sixth century, where he explains his miaphysite Christology to a Syriac-speaking monastic community. In this letter Philoxenus complains about the lack of exactness in the Syriac language for expressing adequately the Christological terminology originally coined in Greek.[114] Philoxenus's situation is complicated by the fact that the Syriac monks whom he is addressing seem to adhere to the traditional Christological vocabulary supported by the authority of none other than Ephrem, the great Syrian teacher, who, as it turns out now, almost two hundred years later, expressed the mystery of incarnation in terms no longer acceptable by the standards of the new post-Chalcedonian theology. As has been demonstrated by L. van Rompay, there was a noticeable change in Philoxenus's attitude to Ephrem, which reflects a general tendency among the West-Syrian theologians of the sixth century toward marginalization of this Church Father as an authority in Christological discussions.[115]

As is clear from this evidence, among the side-effects of the profound Westernization and Hellenization undergone by the Syriac-speaking society during the fifth and sixth centuries were the feelings of inferiority and threat experienced by at least some Syriac-speakers in relation to Greek language and culture. Bearing that in mind, it would be justified to recognize in the barely concealed antipathy toward the Greek language evident in the analysed passages from the *Cave of Treasures* an attempt to challenge the cultural hegemony of Western Christendom, with the Greek language as its most important vehicle, over the indigenous Syriac Christian culture.

[113] *Liber Graduum e codicibus Syriacus*, ed. by Kmosko, col. 4 (*The Book of Steps*, trans. by Kitchen and Parmentier, p. 4).

[114] *Philoxène de Mabbog*, ed. and trans. by de Halleux, pp. 51 (trans. p. 42); cf. also pp. 54–55 (trans. p. 45).

[115] See Van Rompay, 'Mallpânâ dilan Suryâyâ', pars 28–34.

Important as the element of cultural resistance might be, I believe there is an additional dimension in the polemic waged by the author of *Cave of Treasures* against the three languages, namely, a geopolitical one. To appreciate this factor, closer attention needs to be paid to the particular geographical area from which the author comes — the part of northern Mesopotamia that was under the control of the Sasanian Empire. To this background of our author points his close acquaintance with Iranian culture, borne out by the polemic he wages against Zoroastrianism or by his use of certain Iranian ideas and images.[116] Such intimate knowledge of Iranian culture has no parallel in the works of those Syriac Christian writers who lived and worked in the territory controlled by the Byzantines.

Let us turn now to how issues relating to language, and to a more general cultural allegiance, were treated in the Persian Empire. There is enough evidence to suggest that Sasanians pursued a deliberate policy of preventing the spread of the Greek language and culture in the territories controlled by them. The most telling examples of this policy come to us from Armenia, another frontier region that during Late Antiquity served, much like northern Mesopotamia, as an arena where the two superpowers, the Roman and Sasanian empires, competed for dominance. Moses of Khoren, a medieval Armenian historian, reports on the anti-Greek policy pursued by a certain Mehrujan, an Armenian *naxarar* from the family of Artsruni, whom Shapur II sent as commander of the Persian army that invaded Armenia in the 360s. According to Moses of Khoren:

> [Mehrujan] ordered that Greek letters should not be studied but only Persian, and that no one should speak or translate Greek, on the pretext that it was to prevent the Armenians from having any acquaintance or friendly relations with the Greeks.[117]

In the same chapter Moses offers another description of the cultural situation in the eastern, that is Persian, part of Armenia after the signing of a treaty between Theodosios I and Shapur III in the year 387, according to which the country was divided between the two empires. Among other things, Moses mentions the destruction of Greek books by Mehrujan and adds that 'at the division of

[116] I am dealing with this aspect of the *Cave of Treasures* in Chapter 3 of my doctoral dissertation.

[117] Moses of Khoren, *History of the Armenians*, trans. by Thomson, 3. 36, pp. 294–95.

Armenia, the Persian governors did not allow anyone to learn Greek in their part but only Syriac'.[118]

Later in the same section of Moses' *History* we find an indication that it was not only the Persians who played an active role in the clash of cultures in the frontier zone; this issue was also of importance to the Byzantines. Thus in the (fictional?) letter of emperor Theodosius I to the Armenian catholikos Sahak the Great, quoted by Moses of Khoren, the Byzantine monarch reproaches the Catholikos that in his undertaking the rendering into the Armenian language of important church writings the bishop commissioned them to be translated from the Syriac, instead of turning to Constantinople for help.[119]

An aspect of Moses' reports most pertinent to our discussion is that the Persians banned the use of Greek, apparently to prevent Armenia from falling under the influence of their enemy, the Byzantine Empire. That the Sasanians tried to prevent any contact between the Christians of their empire and their Byzantine coreligionists is attested also by numerous Syriac sources. Thus travelling to the Byzantine territory is presented as something that would be perceived by the Persians as an act of disloyalty in a fictitious argument for secession from the ecclesiastical authority of Antioch, put into the mouth of the East-Syrian catholicos Akak by Philoxenos in his *Letter to Abū 'Afr*.[120] This tradition is supported also by the seventh-century *Chronicle* of John bar Penkaye, where, in the section dealing with the gaining by the See of Ctesiphon of ecclesiastical autonomy from Antioch, John explains that it was done primarily because of the difficulties in communication between the two ecclesiastical centres, as the Persians accused the bishops who travelled from Persia to Antioch of espionage.[121] There is also a tradition, probably, originating during the sixth century, that the fifth-century catholicos Babowai was executed by the shah Peroz after having been framed by Barṣauma, the bishop of Nisibis, and accused of making contact with the Romans behind the Persians' back.[122] The sixth-century West-Syrian catalogue *The Names of Catholicoi that were in the Land of Persia* uses this tradition in an anti-Nestorian polemic and formulates

[118] Moses of Khoren, *History of the Armenians*, trans. by Thomson, 3. 54, pp. 322–23.

[119] Moses of Khoren, *History of the Armenians*, trans. by Thomson, 3. 57, p. 329: 'And we especially blame you for this, that disdaining the learned men in our city, you have sought scholarly inventions from certain Syrians'.

[120] Harb, 'Lettre de Philoxène de Mabbūg', pp. 213–14.

[121] *Sources Syriaques, 1*, ed. by Mingana, II, 123–24.

[122] See Gero, *Barṣauma of Nisibis*, pp. 98–109.

Barṣauma's slander of Babowai before the shah as that he and his supporters 'are of the faith of the Romans and are their spies'.[123] This suspicion on the part of the Persian authorities underlies, most likely, one of the canons of Narsai that forbids the students of the school of Nisibis to enter the Byzantine territory without special permission from superiors.[124]

Another important aspect of Moses' accounts is that the Persian administration in Armenia, while banning the Greek language, allowed the use of Syriac, apparently perceiving the latter as having nothing to do with the culture of their enemy. These two aspects of the linguistic policy of the Sasanian administration in Armenia provide us, I believe, with the most suitable context for understanding the goal pursued by the author of the *Cave of Treasures* in his vilification of the three languages and, implicitly, their bearers. I think that, despite the defensive and apologetic garb of this rhetoric, our author was not so much trying to clear the Syrian nation of the blame for the killing Jesus, since it is hard to imagine anyone making such a claim, but rather to incriminate the three nations represented by the three languages, i.e. the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans. In this way he would dissociate his community from these paradigmatic representatives of the Western rival of Sasanian Iran and to affirm their loyalty to the rulers.

Conclusion

The author of the *Cave of Treasures* makes use of Ephrem's name and the notion of Syriac primacy, two integral elements in his programme of promoting a distinctively Syriac identity, by forging a new expression of cultural memory rooted in the biblical past. By attributing his work to Ephrem, our author claims for his work the high spiritual authority of this divinely inspired teacher, revered by virtually all Syriac-speaking Christians in Antiquity. As noted, he was not the first among Syriac writers to resort to this strategy. Yet he was innovative in doing so in that no one before him had made use of Ephrem's name for such a large-scale project as the rewriting of the biblical history of salvation. He was also original in making Ephrem a spokesperson for an archaizing and anti-Western vision of the past.

[123] ܥܠ ܕܐܓܝܠ ܕܫܡܥܘܢ ܥܠ ܕܐܡܘܗܝ ܕܪܘܡܝܐ ܗܢ ܕܐܝܟ ܒܝ; Guidi, 'Mosè di Aghel e Simeone Abbate', p. 557.

[124] See the canon no. 4 in *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, ed. by Vööbus, pp. 75–77.

A major contribution of our author to the development of a peculiar Syriac Christian identity was his creative use of the idea of the primacy of the Syriac language. It should be stressed that he is the first Syriac Christian writer known to us to express this idea. Even more, he seems to be the first Christian author to use it for markedly polemical and apologetic purposes. The stress our author lays on the linguistic factor in his apology for Syriac Christianity echoes the statements of those late antique thinkers who considered language to be the most important constituent of ethnicity. This idea was given lapidary expression by Claudius Marius Victor, a fifth-century Christian Latin poet, who proclaimed that 'gentem lingua facit' ('languages make peoples').[125] Or, as Isidore of Seville, another late antique Christian writer, put it: 'peoples arose from languages, not languages from peoples'.[126]

As we have seen, for the Syriac-speaking Christians living under Sasanian rule, the question of language was not merely a matter of cultural preference; it could be easily converted into the dilemma of political loyalty. It is in this light that one should asses the anti-Hellenistic and anti-Western rhetoric closely intertwined with the affirmations of Syriac primacy in the *Cave of Treasures*.

The author of the *Cave of Treasures*'s particular emphasis on the Syriac elements in his reworking of the biblical narrative reflects, in my opinion, the general process of a rise of Syriac Christian self-awareness in the Near East during the fifth-sixth centuries. Of course, we should not overestimate the extent of this process; but it would be equally misguided to completely ignore it. What is unique in the case of the *Cave of Treasures* is how its author endeavours to forge a distinctively Syriac-centred version of cultural memory for his Christian community while tailoring it to the peculiar cultural and geopolitical reality of Sasanian Mesopotamia.[127] In this endeavour he innovatively fuses cultural and religious elements, laying the foundation for the development of a new, ethnically based type of Syriac Christian identity that emerged after the Muslim conquest of the Near East.[128]

[125] *Poetae christiani minores*, ed. by Petschenig and others, *Alethia*, III. 274, p. 416.

[126] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum*, IX. 1. 14, vol. I, p. 345: 'ex linguis gentes, non ex gentibus linguae exortae sunt'.

[127] On this, see Brock, 'Christians in the Sassanian Empire'.

[128] On this process, see Romeny, 'From Religious Association to Ethnic Community', and other works of the Leiden group, mentioned in n. 3.

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